American literature, and already English literature, manifests this rhizomatic direction to an even greater extent; they know how to move between things, establish a logic of the and, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux*

In *Life in Search of Readers: Reading (in) Chicano/a Literature*, Manuel Martín-Rodríguez twists Tomás Rivera's definition of Chicano literature as "life in search of form" to shift the emphasis from the authorial domain to that of the reader. Martín-Rodríguez thus tackles an aspect which has traditionally escaped scholarly interest: the multiple ways in which literature connects with and is shaped by interaction with its audiences. If traditionally literature and literary history are shaped by their texts and authors—as by now classic volumes such as Ramón Saldívar’s *The Dialectics of Difference*, Bruce Novoa’s *Retrospace*, or Alfred Arteaga’s *Chicano Poetics* illustrate, Martín-Rodríguez posits his thesis that literature has been defined as much by its readers as by its authors. If this statement sounds too surprising, one only needs to think of the diverse audiences and languages of Chicano literature from colonial times to the present. To substantiate his thesis, the critic does not proceed on a teleological argument, but moves back, forth and sideways; in so doing, he is also illustrating his second thesis, which he unfolds in the last chapter, and which constitutes the major contribution of the volume: the possibility of accounting for a history of Chicano literature which departs from the linear perspective which has conventionally established literary archaeologies.

Martín-Rodríguez structures his work into five chapters. Chapter 1, "Life in Search of Readers: The Quinto Sol Generation and the Creation of a Chicano/a Readership," analyses the impact of the first presses owned by Chicanos on both the conditions of production and the reception of literature. The author explores how prior to the Chicano movement, Mexican Americans relied mainly on local audiences and/or declamation and performances. Lack of access to proper channels of distribution explains why writers such as María Amparo Ruiz de Burton or Eusebio Chacón remained isolated from each other, and saw their possibilities of contact with larger audiences severely curtailed. Isolation and tradition become incompatible terms. Those writers’ isolation from each other was so pronounced, writes Martín-Rodríguez, that many of them claimed to be the first Mexican American to try his/her luck at literature (11). This is not due to some anxiety of influence, but to unawareness of previous works. The feeling of writing in a vacuum runs through the writing of José Antonio Villarreal, and is present in Rudolfo Anaya’s work. But this vacuum, the critic clarifies, was felt not because of absences of texts, but because of the absence of channels of distribution and dissemination. It was the Chicano movement that managed to suppress regional borders, and made possible national interaction among Chicanos and Chicanas at a new level. “The search for a national culture and visibility,” writes Martín-Rodríguez, “became one of the major forces behind both the Chicano
Movement and its editorial branch” (18), Quinto Sol and its literary prizes. In order to achieve the readers’ participation, the writers of this period established a poetics grounded in the oral, which translates as fragmentariness, the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated episodes, and open endings. The revision of the works of the first three winners of the Quinto Sol prize, Rivera’s ...Y no se lo tragó la tierra, Rolando Hinojosa’s Klail City, and Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me Ultima, convincingly illustrates the thesis that Chicano literature is first and foremost life in search of readers.

Chapter 2, “Characters as Readers and as Writers: A Metaliterary Reflection on the Reading Process,” delves into the ways in which literature works as a mirror for the act of creation. But if this aspect is relatively accepted, Martín-Rodríguez sets himself the task of examining how metaliterary discourse addresses issues of readership and reception. For, as he indicates, there are many texts that have made their characters readers from the 19th century onwards. The author concentrates on José Antonio Villarreal’s Pocho (1959), and Miguel Méndez’s Peregrinos de Aztlán, the two texts that have constructed the most comprehensive metaliterary discourses on reading. Martín-Rodríguez chooses to read Pocho not as the account of the development of a writer, but as the chronicle of a reader in formation who looks at tradition with detachment. At the same time, the critic questions the position of Pocho as the first novel written by a Chicano. For chronological reasons, Pocho’s founding role is not tenable. The critic follows Hans R. Jauss’s caveat against establishing very precise beginnings when writing a literary history. The question of beginnings, as Jauss has argued, is relatively irrelevant since the focus of a literary historian should shift from chronology to the study of the reasons for the continuous interest in a particular text (55). Pocho, from this perspective, is not just a novel published in 1959, but a novel read in 1971, which is still interesting in 2001 because the reader is still challenged by its lack of conclusion. Peregrinos de Aztlán is, in Martín-Rodríguez’s analysis, another novel rich in metaliterary discourse. Méndez’s characters, in the author’s sophisticated analysis, are pilgrims, but not only in a historical and geographical sense; they are also literary pilgrims: they are those writers that literary history forgot, but who paved the way for the Chicano movement.

In chapter 3, “(En)gendering the Reader: Chicana Literature and Its Implied Audience,” Martín-Rodríguez posits the thesis that the development of contemporary literature written by Chicanas was significantly marked by the double task of both engendering and gendering its audience from the tentative attempts in María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s fiction to Gloria Anzaldúa’s prose and poetry. Through their writings, the critic argues, Chicanas have created a House of Their Own. In the critic’s analysis, writers such as Sandra Cisneros have embarked themselves upon a radical remapping of the female space through her 1984 bestseller The House on Mango Street. For the author, the title needs to be read literally (the book as a house the characters inhabit), and metaphorically (with the different stories in the book functioning much like the rooms in a house) (73). For Martín-Rodriguez, this house/book is a female space where Esperanza’s voice coexists with those of the other characters in a nonhierarchical way. Cisneros thus includes the voices of the voiceless, of the trapped women, of the abused girls, and of other subordinate females. Yet, even if Esperanza creates an open house, the critic explores how Cisneros constructs a set of norms and strategies (what Iser calls “repertoire”) that privileges the female reader as her implied audience. In this manner, Cisneros’s work is a response to an entire body of 1960s and 1970s literature that failed to provide female readers with that kind of take on the
female-to-female tradition that *The House*, together with Cisneros’s poetry, manage to create. Cisneros’s accomplishment is twofold: she reads and reformulates tradition, and she (en)genders her own readers through her texts.

Another strategy to attain this double aim is for Chicana writers to revisit cultural iconography and the ancestral past—such as that invoked in the term Aztlán. As is well known, Valdez and other writers appropriated pre-Hispanic mythology to limit female roles or cast female characters into a very domestic role. It is in reaction to this manipulation that writers began to show an interest in revisiting figures such as Malinche or La Llorona. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, Martin-Rodríguez suggests, can be understood within this intellectual urge to revisit the past and underscore its absences. Anzaldúa, from this perspective, rereads the literature of the Chicano movement, while proposing an alternative female-to-female cultural text. After exploring Anzaldúa’s process of reclaiming a female mythology, literary tradition and cultural theory, the critic moves on to exemplify the ways in which Ana Castillo’s widely-acclaimed *The Mixquiahuala Letters* as well as Erlinda González Berry’s *Paletitas de Guayaba* contribute to the creation of a repertoire for an implied female reader.

In chapter 4, “Querido Reader: Linguistic and Marketing Strategies for Addressing a Multicultural Readership,” Martin-Rodríguez sets himself a double task; he examines the strategies employed by Chicano/a authors in order to evaluate the diverse ways their texts manage to address their monolingual or multilingual readers; he also addresses the extratextual mechanisms that work toward expanding the audience for Chicano literature (107). The critic delves into the formation of what seems to be a new canon of mainstream, commercially successful literature that discards or is not receptive to other books written in different languages other than English, such as Margarita Cota-Cárdenas’s *Puppet*. The issue faced by many writers is then how to configure a literary communication that secures a transcultural repertoire. Drawing from Ángel Rama’s concept of “transculturación narrativa,” Martin-Rodríguez gives a transcultural slant to Iser’s *The Act of Reading* in order to examine the ways in which a Chicano/a writer can forge such a repertoire. In order to approach culturally and linguistically diverse audiences, the author argues, writers employ a series of strategies. The use of children as characters is a common practice (think of *Bless Me Ultima* and *The House on Mango Street*). Other writers opt for cultural explanations and/or linguistic translation. Linguistic translation can be carried out in a number of ways, as the author exemplifies, from literal to indirect translation, to the cultural and linguistic translation as carried out by Rolando Hinojosa, who has translated his own works to bring them closer to the particular experiences of his audience.

Further, Martin-Rodríguez examines the way in which extratextual resources have been used to market and promote Chicano literature to a (mainstream) multicultural audience. Some strategies, such as the labeling of works as magical realistic have resulted, for the author, in the commodification of Chicano literature. The critic convincingly illustrates the different marketing strategies employed by non-Chicano controlled presses and other presses such as Quinto Sol Press and Arte Público Press. The successful marketing strategies employed by major presses (manipulating the covers or creating a homogenizing style) imply, as Martin-Rodríguez demonstrates, a dangerous essentializing of the culture(s) the books represents.

Finally, in chapter 5, “Reading (in) the Past: Textual Recovery and the History of (Reading) Chicano/a Literature,” Martin-Rodríguez tackles the essential issue of the
reconstruction of a literary history in the midst of what he describes as one of the most recent yet dramatic shifts in the history of Chicano literature: the recovery and reprinting of forgotten and formerly lost literary works. The urgent question the critic posits is how to accommodate this new body of writing. Before outlining his own suggestion, Martín-Rodríguez revises the major attempts at arranging this material. The predominant trend has favored a sequential ordering of known works. Yet, as the critic argues, this chronological approach leaves out the fact that literary history is not predicated upon the existence of an immutable past that the historian can record without further mediation. For, as Jauss has argued, “the reappropriation of past works occurs simultaneously with the perpetual mediation of past and present art and of traditional evaluation and current literary attempts” (qtd. 145). The chapter analyzes the reception of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton at different points of history to elucidate how readings of texts vary depending on the different political and ideological climates. Moreover, the author argues that the attempt at restoring an uninterrupted chronological sequence implies eliminating those other traits that imply heterodoxy or heterogeneity. Yet, as the critic persuasively puts it, the history of Chicano literature cannot be written without taking into account those very differences. Notwithstanding the attempts at reconstructing a literary history that have favored a search for continuity from the accepted beginnings of this literature to the present, the problem remains that if there is continuity, there is also disruption and exclusion. A second dominant impulse in the rewriting of literary history is what Martín-Rodríguez calls the encyclopedic trend, which creates chronologies through listings of recovered works. Beyond its undeniable utility, these reconstructed listings of recovered texts erase the circumstances and the conditions of production, that is, the history of displacement and marginalization that resulted in the temporal disappearance of those texts. The third element that has characterized the reading of the literary past is the idea of Chicano literature as a national literature. Literary history, in that context, was conceived as the process through which to chronicle the continuous progress in the realm of letters from the nation’s origin to the present. And yet, the nationalistic impulse seems inadequate, for, among other reasons, it ignores the undeniable transnational scope of literary trends, experiences and tastes. How, then, Martín-Rodríguez questions, can a history of literature account for loss and discontinuity?

The critic’s suggestion is the writing of an integrated account that analyzes both the connectors that have kept Chicano literature alive, as well as the discontinuities that have marked its existence. Drawing from a metaphor from the Manuscript of Tlatelolco, Martín-Rodríguez argues that Chicano literature is “a net made of holes,” and as such, should focus on the “knots” as well as on the “holes,” which are part of its very existence. Given the limitations of the perspectives analyzed above, the author proposes a rhizomatic approach. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the rhizome in A Thousand Plateaus, the critic conceives literary history as a decentered assemblage with multiple lines of entry. Here, Martín-Rodríguez’s argument is at its best, for he proposes a genuinely provocative outlook on Chicano literature. From this rhizomatic perspective, the literary historian can enter this body of literature at any point, cross and transgress national or linguistic borders, and acknowledge his/her role as interpreter—and reader—of this literature. If a traditional literary history starts with definite beginnings, a rhizomatic literary history would allow the historian to enter at a particular time, then move back or
forward, or sideways. This approach, Martín-Rodríguez argues, ensures that texts are accorded a multiplicity of meanings.

The critic’s argument comes, in fact, full circle, for by the end of chapter 5 the reader realizes that s/he has entered/exited Chicano literature through different points of entry/departure. S/he has moved back, forward and sideways throughout the whole literary journey Martín-Rodríguez suggests. The volume, interestingly enough, thus offers itself to the reader as a series of itineraries, much in the same way as Ana Castillo opens The Mixquahuala Letters. If conventionally literary historians have opted for a line of descent (Gates 1988: 120), or “a vast genealogical poem,” as Kimberly Benston describes African American literature (in Gates 1988: 122), in proposing a rhizomatic perspective, Martín-Rodríguez opts for the opposite option, for the antigenealogy. In underscoring the multiplicity of the rhizomatic structure, Life in Search of Readers thus dispels what Bruce-Novoa calls “the ideal of unity,” and makes room, much in Esperanza’s fashion, for a plurality of voices (Bruce-Novoa 1994: 239).

Martín-Rodríguez’s proposal presents the multiplicity of the rhizome as an apt means of approaching Chicano literature. At the same time, it immerses the concept of cultural and literary tradition in the erratic flows of history (Gilroy 1993: 191) rather than consider it as a safeguard against contingency. The rhizomatic approach thus reserves the idea of literary tradition for a sense of connectedness that arises out of the knots and the holes, that is, out of the myriads of fragments and voices that make up a literature. The possibility of viewing Chicano literature as an a-centered and nonhierarchical system may in fact open new avenues of analysis; but can also be considered as another idealistic attempt which chooses not to see the pre-established paths which channel production, as well as the actual power takeovers—such as the Chicano movement and its relegation of women to a domestic sphere—which have conditioned literary production. Moreover, the question remains as to what extent Chicano literature can actually establish, to return to Deleuze and Guattari, a logic of the “and” that overthrows ontology precisely at a time when Chicano literature is defining its own space within American literature and American academe. And yet, Martín-Rodríguez’s suggestive proposal stands as a challenging approach inasmuch as it immerses the rhizomatic approach in the contingencies of history, and thus provides an instance that memory does accrue in rhizomatic assemblages. The volume, finally, stands as a most valuable and recommendable contribution to an ever-expanding field of Chicano literature, which will be extremely useful for teachers, researchers, and readers.

Works Cited